

Peter Martyr Vermigli's *Preces sacrae* (1564) and the Problem of Prayers as Historical Sources

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ABSTRACT

This article combines a study of Peter Martyr Vermigli's *Sacred Prayers* with a methodological concern for the particular challenges involved in coming to grips with prayers as historical sources. It demonstrates that in the reception history of Vermigli's prayers there has been a recurring tendency to read them as something other than prayers, a commentary on the Psalms for instance. By contrast, this article attends to the specificity of their genre and form as prayers. This approach leads, first, to a fresh appreciation of the *Preces sacrae* as a rare and revealing source of their kind, since not many prayers offered before lectures in sixteenth-century Protestant universities have survived; secondly, to the discovery of important, as yet unknown connections between Vermigli's *Preces sacrae* and Wolfgang Capito's *Precactiones*; and thirdly to an understanding of the spiritual depth of the *Preces sacrae* going beyond their propositional theological content.

Keywords Peter Martyr Vermigli; prayer; spirituality; Strasbourg; Wolfgang Capito; historiography; phenomenology

Introduction

Prayers are a distinctive kind of historical source insofar as their *telos* or point was not to be read or spoken in just any context. They were meant to be *prayed*. This article will consider what this means for studying prayers as an historical source, and do so by means of a case study of the *Preces sacrae* by Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499-1562). In the first section, I will demonstrate that Vermigli's *Sacred Prayers* are remarkable as a kind. Apart from Vermigli's prayers, very few sixteenth-century prayers which were prayed in the context of theology lectures have survived. This makes them a source for unique insights into the integration of worship and learning in early Protestant academies. In the second

section, I will show that there are as yet unknown connections to be made between Vermigli's prayers, the prayers of his Strasbourg predecessor, Wolfgang Capito (c.1478-1541) and a family of prayers in England. Thirdly, I will illustrate how there has been a tendency in the reception of Vermigli's prayers to fail to acknowledge their particular genre – they have been read as if they were veiled chronicles, covert dogmatic treatises or Psalm commentaries. This tendency to bypass what is specific about the genre of prayer is something which may be true of research on other historical prayers as well. Based on this, I will finally consider the specificity of prayer-genre with the aid of Jean-Louis Chrétien's recent phenomenology of prayer, and explain how a phenomenological approach to prayer may elucidate our understanding of historical prayers such as Vermigli's.

Vermigli's *Sacred Prayers*

Insofar as the number of translations and editions of a book count towards a measure of its success, Vermigli's prayers are one of his most successful or popular works.¹ After their first publication in 1564, they saw a further eleven editions before 1620, four in Latin, three in French, two in English, one in German, one in Czech.² The *Preces* have thus been translated into more European vernaculars than any other work of Vermigli's, and in terms of the total number of editions, they come second after his *Loci communes*, before the *Tractatio* on the Eucharist, or his dialogue on the two natures of Christ with seven editions each, and before any of Vermigli's biblical commentaries.³

Yet it is not only within the reception history of Peter Martyr Vermigli's oeuvre that his *Preces sacrae* stand out, but more generally as a rare case of the particular kind of

¹ The *Preces sacrae* are easily accessible in Donnelly's translation: Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*. All English quotes in this article will be taken from this. Where the Latin text is provided in addition, it is taken from Vermigli, *Preces sacrae*.

² Donnelly, *Bibliography*, 72-81. Donnelly mentions only two French and one English editions. I have included a further French edition of which Donnelly did not seem to be aware: Vermigli, *Sainctes prieres*; cf. <http://digital.wlb-stuttgart.de/purl/bsz379033666> 4 Feb 2016. Moreover, I included Bull's (part) English edition, which includes Vermigli's first few prayers only; see Bull, *Christian Prayers*. Most of these editions translate Josias Simler's (1530-1576) dedicatory letter of the first publication, if there is any preface at all. The only alternative preface I am aware of is Hans Jacob Baumann's in his German translation of 1589.

³ Donnelly, "Psalms and Reformation Piety," xxi.

source that they are. This is what the following brief study of their historical *Sitz im Leben* reveals.

In his prefatory letter to the *Preces sacrae*, Josias Simler (1530-1576), a professor at Zurich's *Carolinum* academy, wrote that 'Martyr read these prayers in public at the end of his lectures at the Strasbourg Academy.'⁴ Peter Martyr Vermigli taught in Strasbourg twice in his life (1542-1547 and 1553-1556), interrupted by his stay in Oxford.⁵ The Strasbourg *Hochschule* consisted of a *Gymnasium* where pupils were taught classical Latin, grammar, rhetoric and dialectic, as well as of the Academy which provided further academic education. The educational programme of the entire *Hochschule* was significantly shaped by the humanist, Johann Sturm (1507-1589), who formally inaugurated the *Gymnasium* in 1538.⁶ The academic lectures of the Academy, however, go back to the mid-1520s. Strasbourg Reformers had given theological lectures since 1523 in order to educate clergy sympathetic to the cause of the reform, and by 1530 the lectures had become institutionalized. Martin Bucer, Wolfgang Capito and Kaspar Hedio took it in turns to lecture on books of the Old and New Testaments.⁷ In 1542, Vermigli replaced the recently deceased Capito as a lecturer, and expounded the Old Testament books of Lamentations, the twelve minor Prophets, Genesis, Exodus and much of Leviticus during his first stay in Strasbourg.⁸ During his second stay, he lectured on the book of Judges, as well as on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁹

What would a typical lecture of Vermigli's have looked like? According to Anton Schindling, lecturers at the Strasbourg Academy followed the medieval custom of commenting on a canonical source. They first read or dictated the source text before

⁴ Josias Simler to Hermann Folkersheimer of Frisia, 20 June 1564, in: Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 3-4, here 3.

⁵ On Vermigli's stay in England see McNair, "Peter Martyr in England," and MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 380-2; 403-9; 501-33.

⁶ Cf. Cameron, *The European Reformation*, 393-5.

⁷ Cf. Schindling, *Humanistische Hochschule*, 208-9; 341-2.

⁸ Anderson, *Reformer in Exile*, 79. In contrast to what Anderson held, however, Vermigli did not lecture on the Old Testament book of Jeremiah, but on the Lamentations, which are traditionally ascribed to the prophet Jeremiah. His commentary on the Lamentations has recently been made accessible in translation; see Vermigli, *Lamentations*.

⁹ Anderson, *Reformer in Exile*, 175.

discussing it paragraph by paragraph, thereby drawing on older interpretations of the same passage.¹⁰ An important innovation effected by the humanist reformers, however, was to focus their lectures exclusively on books of the Bible, departing from the medieval practice of commentary on other sources, such as Lombard's *Sentences* or patristic collections.

How common was it to pray at the end of lectures, as Vermigli did? In his magisterial book on the Strasbourg *Hochschule*, Schindling does not know whether it was common for lecturers to pray before or after their lectures in the Strasbourg Academy; there seems to be no evidence of this practice, other than Vermigli's *Preces* (which Schindling does not mention).¹¹ However, this lack of evidence is most likely attributable to how ordinary the practice was; *it was taken for granted*. Such a view is supported, first, by evidence we have from the *Gymnasium*, where worship formed an integral part of the daily life of students at Strasbourg. Psalms in Latin and German were sung at midday and in the evening, and students were taught the Lord's Prayer, the Apostle's Creed, and hymns such as the 'Veni creator' at a young age.¹² Secondly, two documents from the Lausanne Academy, which is in many ways comparable to the Strasbourg Academy, shed light on the practice of prayer in a sixteenth-century Protestant university and confirm that it must have been by no means unusual for professors to pray at the beginning and end of a lecture.¹³

The *Leges scholae Lausannensis*, promulgated on 25 August 1547, describe the duties of a professor of theology,¹⁴ and together with Jean Ribit's *Studiorum ratio* (1549),¹⁵ they provide a detailed account of the form and shape a theology lecture should

¹⁰ Schindling, *Humanistische Hochschule*, 210; 341-2.

¹¹ Professor Schindling confirmed in an email to me in June 2016 that he does not know whether it was common for lecturers to pray as part of their courses at the Strasbourg *Hochschule*.

¹² Vogeles, *Quellen und Bausteine*, 250.

¹³ Anderson, *Reformer in Exile*, 29.

¹⁴ The relevant section of the *Leges* is reproduced in Crousaz, *L'Académie de Lausanne*, 496-9.

¹⁵ Ribit, "Studiorum ratio", 44-5. Ribit died 1564, and was a professor of Greek and theology in Lausanne 1541-1559. For details on his biography see Crousaz, *L'Académie de Lausanne*, 542.

have taken in Lausanne in the 1540s. Since the Lausanne and the Strasbourg academies were established at a similar time and in confessionally similar environments, and since the Strasbourg academy is even thought to have influenced the Lausanne academy,¹⁶ it is possible to assume that Vermigli's lectures would have followed a very similar pattern. Jean Ribit began his lectures in Lausanne with a prayer. He then first read, as the *Leges* prescribed, the biblical text Hebrew or Greek, and translated it into (Greek and) Latin. Secondly, the professor was to give an outline of the lesson, and then, thirdly, to explain the meaning of the passage 'clearly.' Fourthly, he had to add other interpretations on the same text, as put forward by different commentators. Furthermore, the professor was to draw the students' attention to the theological *loci* touched on in the particular text. Finally, he was supposed to describe the usefulness of the passage for individual believers and the Church as a whole. At the end of his lesson, the professor was to dictate, in the form of conclusions, a synthesis of what he had taught. According to Ribit, moreover, a brief exhortation and a prayer concluded each lecture.¹⁷

Vermigli's lectures in Strasbourg are likely to have had a similar sequence as the lectures at the Lausanne academy, due to the similarity of the two universities and the various connections between them. Combined with the information given by Simler in his preface – namely that Vermigli used to pray the *Preces* at the end of his lectures – the Lausanne sources thus provide us with quite detailed information on the practice of teaching at early Protestant universities and the place of prayer in it. Two conclusions can be drawn from this:

First, we can infer that there must have been a wealth of pre- and post-lecture prayers in sixteenth-century Protestant universities. Not many of these are, however, still extant. Many of them were never written down in the first place, and even if they had been put down, most of them did not survive the ravages of time. We know that Vermigli himself did not think that his prayers deserved publication. It is only owing to his literary

¹⁶ Cameron, *The European Reformation*, 394.

¹⁷ See also the detailed description of the format of a lecture in Crousaz, *L'Académie de Lausanne*, 396-8. She rightly notes (357), moreover, that the scope of the *Leges* as a source is limited by virtue of them being a description of an ideal state, rather than a report of the actual activity of the Academy. This does not hold for Jean Ribit's *Studiorum ratio*, however, since his 'guide to study' is a detailed description of a week of his life as a professor. On Ribit's *Studiorum ratio* see Meylan, "Professeurs et étudiants."

executor, Simler, that they were preserved and published – something which he decided to do after he had accidentally come across the tiny sheets of paper on which they were written in Vermigli's library after the latter's death.¹⁸ Very few similar 'lecture prayers' of sixteenth-century Protestants survived. Indeed, to my knowledge, Calvin – a number of whose lecture-related prayers survived¹⁹ – is the only contemporary known example other than Vermigli.

Secondly, this circumstance means that, Vermigli's *Sacred Prayers* can serve as a unique source of information into the habitual inclusion of liturgical elements in the timetable of (humanist) Protestant academies and what might be implied by this. It seems that Vermigli and his colleagues did not see learning and worship as two incompatible activities. Any (modern) understanding of learning as provision of supposedly objective facts had not yet taken root.²⁰ On the contrary, learning about the truths of revelation was a form of worship, since it meant understanding God's purposes more deeply. It is the same awe and wonder that Vermigli and his contemporaries experienced, one can infer, when they studied the meaning of the biblical texts as when they related to God in prayer. This is the reason why praying at the beginning or end of a lecture did not seem an extraneous addition, but a natural extension and intensification of the reading, translating and commenting which happened during the rest of the lesson.

In sum, Vermigli's *Preces sacrae* provide us with a window into the teaching practice at the Strasbourg academy (and, by extension, of comparable early Protestant universities) which otherwise would not be known. For Vermigli and his contemporaries

¹⁸ Simler, Preface, in Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 3.

¹⁹ Calvin's prayers were recorded with his lectures, but omitted when the lectures were revised as commentaries. Examples of prayers can thus be found in those of Calvin's lectures which were originally published in the lecture format, which is the case for Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezechiel, Daniel, and the Minor Prophets; see *Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety*, 240-5. In his published lectures on Daniel, for instance, there are recorded both a fixed prayer which Calvin was accustomed to use at the beginning of his lectures, as well as the varying prayers with which he ended. For a modern edition, see Calvin, *A Commentary on Daniel*, 77, 89 etc. I am grateful to Dr Karin Maag who has brought this to my attention.

²⁰ On the modern separation between worship and learning, see for instance Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*.

there existed an organic integration of worship and learning, faith and reason. In this sense, at least, they can be seen as relatively ‘pre-modern’ still.

The Capito-Vermigli-Taverner connection

Vermigli’s *Sacred Prayers* are, however, not only unique in their having survived, but also in their particular form. A brief study of their characteristic form as prayers ‘drawn from the Psalms’ will reveal crucial and as yet unseen connections between Vermigli and his predecessor Wolfgang Capito in Strasbourg, as well as with an English anthology of prayers.

Each prayer in Vermigli’s *Preces sacrae*, is linked to a psalm. In Simler’s first print version, each prayer is entitled ‘*ex psalmo...*’ and all subsequent publications have followed this convention. Simler gave the entire book the title: *Preces sacrae ex Psalmis Davidis desumptae* – which Donnelly, in his 1996 translation, fittingly rendered as *Sacred Prayers Drawn from the Psalms of David*. The 297 prayers contained in the small book are based on 149 of the 150 biblical Psalms. It is likely that the prayer on Psalm 87, which is missing, once existed but was lost. In the majority of the cases, two prayers refer to the same Psalm. There are, however, up to five prayers on the same Psalm, while some Psalms, on the other hand, are only associated with a single prayer.²¹

In what way, however, do the *Preces* draw from and meditate on the Psalms? Vermigli regularly includes some of the imagery used in the Psalm from which he draws. For instance, in the case of the two prayers based on Psalm 23 (‘The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, etc.’), Vermigli repeatedly refers to God as good shepherd, and to ‘us’ as straying sheep. He does not, however, elaborate on the imagery, nor on any of the other powerful tropes of the Psalm – from the green pastures, to the valley of the shadow of death, to the table prepared in the presence of enemies. In a way that is typical for the *Preces*, Vermigli takes these images up only to ‘explain’ them spiritually: the green pastures are ‘food of heavenly doctrine ... with the fertile irrigation of the Holy Spirit,’ the table which the Lord prepares a ‘banquet of your teaching’ etc.²²

Moreover, despite referring to a set of texts as different as the 150 Psalms, which range from songs of praise to lament, Vermigli’s prayers are relatively homogenous in

²¹ On precise numbers see Donnelly, “Psalms and Reformation Piety”, xvii.

²² Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 24.

their form and content. As Donnelly observed, most of Vermigli's prayers 'touch on the same themes in roughly the same order.'²³ They nearly always begin with an invocation of God the Father, before placing before God the afflictions of his people. These afflictions are, moreover, connected with the sense of personal and collective fallenness which pervades the prayers; the troubles of the Church flow from the sins of the people, so God is rightfully punishing them. In almost all the prayers, this gloomy tone is lightened, however, by praising of God's goodness, and Vermigli's firm trust that God will deliver his people from their distress. The prayers end with 'Through Jesus Christ, our Lord,' or a minor variant of this conclusion.

Yet why did Vermigli choose to draw from the Psalms in his end-of-lecture prayers? One general reason for this lies in the importance of the Psalter for Protestants in Strasbourg and beyond. From the early 1530s, complete Psalters in German were prepared in Strasbourg for the use of the congregation.²⁴ Through Jean Calvin, who was a refugee in Strasbourg in the late 1530s, this move was to become crucial for the devotional life of Protestantism. Calvin, who had already called for congregational Psalm-singing in Geneva in 1537, was inspired to issue a small volume entitled *Alcuns Psaumes et Cantiques mis en chant* in Strasbourg in 1539. This was the beginning of the Genevan Psalter, which was to become the standard vehicle of congregational devotion for (at least) French-speaking Protestantism, comparable to the use of Coverdale's Psalter in the 1662 English Book of Common Prayer. We can infer, therefore, that by the 1540s, when Vermigli taught in Strasbourg, the Psalms were already firmly established in the life of Strasbourg Protestants. It was no coincidence that the students of the Academy daily sang multiple Psalms in Latin and German.

This context alone would have been reason enough for Vermigli to draw his end-of-lecture prayers from the Psalms. There is, however, a more specific reason for doing so – he was continuing a tradition begun by Wolfgang Fabricius Capito.

Vermigli was Capito's successor in the Old Testament chair at the Strasbourg Academy, after the latter had died of the plague in November 1541.²⁵ Capito had been

²³ Donnelly, "The Psalms and Reformation Piety", xix.

²⁴ On this and the following see Cameron, *The European Reformation*, 256-6.

²⁵ Schindling, *Humanistische Hochschule*, 351.

lecturing – mainly on the Old Testament – in Strasbourg since 1523, having taught in Basel previously.²⁶ In 1536, he had published a small volume called *Precationes Christianae*, which displays some remarkable similarities with Vermigli's *Preces sacrae*.²⁷ For despite the fact that the scholarly, devotional and poetic literature on the Psalms was abundant in the sixteenth-century,²⁸ works including collected prayers drawing inspiration from all the Psalms and where the prayers are fairly short and uniform amongst themselves, were to my knowledge quite rare. Capito's *Precationes Christianae*, however, satisfy all these criteria. The book contains prayers on each Psalm, which are uniform in style – as are Vermigli's *Preces sacrae*. It seems, therefore, that Vermigli's practice of drawing prayers from Psalms, in a way that nonetheless allows for the prayers to be relatively uniform, can be traced to Strasbourg, and to Wolfgang Capito in particular.

This evidence interlinks Vermigli's *Preces sacrae* with a collection of prayers which had some significant reception and impact beyond the French-speaking world. For Capito's prayers (which after their first publication in Strasbourg (1536) saw at least six further Latin print editions in the sixteenth-century)²⁹ were translated into English in 1539 by Richard Taverner (1505-1575)³⁰ This Taverner-Capito Psalter has been said to have 'reshaped devotional practice' in Protestant England in the sixteenth-century.³¹ Moreover, Capito's prayers must have been translated a second time into English in 157[2?] by Robert Fylles.³² According to the dedication to Viscount Ferie of Hereford, the book

²⁶ Schindling, *Humanistische Hochschule*, 346-7.

²⁷ Capito, *Precationes christianae*. In a 1556 edition, the entire text of these prayers is available online: <http://www.mdz-nbn-resolving.de/urn/resolver.pl?rn=urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb10173384-2> (28 July 2016). The 1556 edition also included a calendar and various other catechetical passages. The prayers begin on fol. 11, entitled "Centum et quinquaginta Psalmi, in precationum formam, prout Christiano maxime profuerint, redacti."

²⁸ There is plethora of works published on the Psalms in the sixteenth century: translations, paraphrases, metrical and poetical renderings, meditations, etc – not to speak of theological lectures and commentaries on the book of Psalms. This Psalm-literature in sixteenth-century England is reviewed by Zim, *English Metrical Psalms*.

²⁹ 1542 in Lyon (Frellon); 1545 in Lyon (Frellon); 1554 in Lyon (DuBois); 1555 in Cologne (Birckmann); 1556 in Zurich (Froschauer) and 1597 in Cologne (Gymnicus).

³⁰ *Epitome of the Psalmes*.

³¹ Felch, "Halff a Scrypture Woman," 156.

³² *Godly prayers and meditations*.

contains 150 English prayers ‘taken out of the Psalmes, declaring briefly the substance and interpretation of the same, whiche booke is likewise printed in the Latin and Frenche tonges.’³³ Fylles does not indicate who the author of the prayers is. It is evident from the text, however, that they must be Capito’s prayers, even if the text does not match the Capito-Taverner Psalter one-to-one. The differences in formulations and phrasings could be explained by what must have been an independent translation in each case.

If the prayers translated by Fylles are indeed Capito’s prayers, then it is possible to trace all sixteenth-century English collections of Psalm-prayers (as exhaustively listed in Zim’s *English Metrical Psalms*) which display a close formal affinity to Vermigli’s *Preces* either to Vermigli himself or to Capito.³⁴ Since an exhaustive overview of the sixteenth-century Psalm literature Europe-wide does not exist yet, it is impossible to determine within the limits of this article whether a similar statement could be made with regard to the Continent.

We have found, therefore, that one of the reasons why Vermigli chose to pray as he did at the end of his lectures was to follow, and honour, the example of his deceased predecessor, Capito. This discovery suggests a further and hitherto unknown connection between Vermigli’s oeuvre and the English Reformation, since Vermigli’s prayers belong to a family of prayers which became influential in English Protestantism through Richard Taverner’s translation.

The link between Vermigli’s prayers and the prayers of his predecessor might moreover shed new light on the contested question of when Vermigli’s prayers were penned. The controversy about when Vermigli wrote the prayers revolves around whether they stem from his first or his second stay in Strasbourg. The majority of the commentators agree that there are good reasons to think that the *Preces sacrae* stem from Vermigli’s first stay in Strasbourg.³⁵ Emidio Campi, for instance, argues that all Vermigli’s prayers were composed between 1544 and 1547, viz. during the second half of Vermigli’s first stay in Strasbourg.³⁶ Campi’s case for linking certain of the prayers to

³³ Ibid., A4r.

³⁴ See numbers 9, 46, 48, 52 in Zim, *English Metrical Psalms*, Appendix, 211-259.

³⁵ For a brief literature review on the question of the dating of the *Preces* including the relevant references see Donnelly, “Psalms and Reformation Piety,” xvi-xvii.

³⁶ Campi, “The *Preces Sacrae*,” 266.

historical events in the Strasbourg Church during 1544-1547 is a good one, yet to deduce from this that *all* of the prayers necessarily have to stem from this time because they display similar structural features and are theologically homogenous, is not a compelling conclusion.³⁷ For why should we necessarily assume that Vermigli dramatically changed whether or how he prayed at the end of his lectures over the course of a few years? Moreover, if Vermigli took up a particular practice of his predecessor it seems unlikely that he should have done so only two years after he had arrived in Strasbourg. Therefore, while the connection between Vermigli's and Capito's prayers strengthens the view that Vermigli penned (at the very least some, or most of) his prayers during his first stay in Strasbourg by taking up the practice of his predecessor, it also makes it more probable for him to have started doing so sooner rather than later after he had arrived in Strasbourg in 1542.

Prayers as Psalm commentaries? An unacknowledged genre

Emidio Campi's article is one of two contemporary studies devoted to Vermigli's prayers, the other one is by Herman Selderhuis.³⁸ When comparing these two approaches to the *Preces*, it emerges that neither focused on what is characteristic for the *Preces* as prayers, or what difference their genre makes to understanding their content.

The lens through which Emidio Campi has viewed the prayers is, as already mentioned, that of scrutinizing them for historical allusions so as to establish the date of their composition. It is indeed likely that the prayers do at times allude to historical events, and Campi is a careful reader of these allusions. Nevertheless, when he writes that 'it is unfortunately not possible to trace in [the prayers] with absolute clarity the various phases of the [Schmalkaldic War],'³⁹ one wonders whether such a precise pursuit would have been wholly appropriate in the first place. After all, the *Preces* are Vermigli's prayers, not Vermigli's encrypted gloss on the Schmalkaldic War, the Council of Trent, or the divisions within the Strasbourg Church.

Herman Selderhuis, on the other hand, has read the *Preces* in order to formalize their theology into a kind of dogmatic system. He focuses 'on just the theological content'

³⁷ Ibid., 261-6.

³⁸ Selderhuis, "Expounding Psalms."

³⁹ Campi, "The *Preces Sacrae*," 257.

of the prayers, and maintains that their ‘various topics can be categorized into five central themes.’⁴⁰ These themes include the ‘glory of God,’ the ‘depravity of man’ as well as ‘justification and sanctification.’ These themes are all doubtlessly central in Vermigli’s prayers. Yet one may wonder whether reading them as a concise, though slightly veiled version of a Reformed dogmatics does justice to them as prayers. Is it really possible to focus on a prayer’s theological ‘content’ only, separating its content entirely from its form?

This brief résumé of the two recent studies of the *Preces* shows that contemporary research has not fully considered the particular genre of the *Preces*. The tendency to detach from their form as prayers, however, is by no means new. From quite early in the history of their interpretation there has been a tendency to read them as if they were not prayers, but rather a kind of Psalm commentary. It was Simler who in his preface to the first edition already went in this direction when he wrote: ‘These prayers partly explain briefly and clearly the theme of many Psalms and partly explain many obscure and difficult passages with a lucid paraphrase.’⁴¹ Campi refers to this sentence when he writes that

the composition of [the *preces*] has two main objectives ...: to help the understanding of [the Psalms] not only from the point of view of language, but also of content, and to provide a contemporary application through a continual reference to examples drawn from daily experience.⁴²

It is important to note, however, that Simler’s statement originally is only a corroborative clause for the second of two main reasons why he decided to publish the *Preces* (*primum...deinde...etenim*). For Simler the first reason why the prayers were ‘worthy of being published’ (even though Vermigli had not written them ‘with this in mind’) is that it is necessary that even after the end of both the council of Trent and the Schmalkaldic wars ‘to beseech God with ardent prayer that no similar conflagration (*incendium*) break out now.’⁴³ This means that he published these prayers in order for them to be *prayed*. Even if

⁴⁰ Selderhuis, “Expounding Psalms,” 250.

⁴¹ Simler, Preface, in Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 3.

⁴² Campi, “The *Preces Sacrae*,” 260.

⁴³ Simler, Preface, in Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 3.

God has answered earlier prayers, and has relieved the Church of the tribulations she was experiencing at the time (Simler implies), this kind of prayer does not lose its value. Not only is new distress always at hand; more importantly still, this kind of ‘ardent’ prayer leads the faithful into an attitude of complete dependence on God. Practicing and deepening this attitude, Simler intimates, is a fruitful and worthwhile exercise, regardless of one’s current outward circumstances.

The second reason why Simler decided to publish the *Preces* is that they ‘are clear and depart only little from the words of the Psalms,’ to which he immediately adds: ‘this is something I judge very important in prayers.’⁴⁴ Here again, the *Preces* are valued by Simler as prayers, and as good prayers in particular. He publishes them precisely because he deems them to be exemplary of how Christians should pray.

‘Good’ prayers ought to be soaked in scriptural language; Simler is not alone in thinking so. As Alec Ryrie has argued in *Being Protestant*, it was indeed commonly held amongst Protestants at the time that prayers should ideally consist in biblical quotations, half-quotations, paraphrases or allusions.⁴⁵ This attitude was born out of the sense that human words were inadequate and indeed corrupt. Yet if true prayer ‘was supposed to be the work of the Spirit within, what better words to use than those which the Spirit himself had inspired?’⁴⁶ That the *Preces* remain close to the words, content and spirit of the Psalms is, therefore, the reason, according to Simler, why they are good prayers and thus worthy to be published. It is precisely this closeness to the Psalms which – secondarily – makes the *Preces* good elucidations of some of the more difficult Psalms.

In sum, therefore, Simler’s primary reasons for wishing to print the *Preces* were other than seeing in them a quasi-commentary on the Psalms: He deemed them to be fine prayers (because of their use of the inspired words of the Bible), and acknowledged the lasting value of praying. In light of this it becomes clear that Campi’s evaluation of the relevant passage in Simler’s preface not only mixes Vermigli’s objectives of ‘composition’ with Simler’s motives for publication, but also misreads Simler’s main

⁴⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁵ Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, 225.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 225.

objectives. These are more related to appreciating the *Preces* as prayers than as Psalm-commentaries.

This reading of Simler's main reasons for publishing the *Preces* is moreover supported by the title page of Capito's *Precationes* which, as we have seen, were likely to have been Vermigli's model. The words printed on the title page translate as: 'Christian Prayers, composed in imitation of the Psalms ...: through which these become more excellent for the formation of the consciences as well as the habits of the elect.'⁴⁷ Being close to the Psalms – so Capito – makes his prayers more excellent: we hear here an echo of Simler's second reason of why he published Vermigli's prayers. Moreover, and most importantly so, Capito's intention in composing and praying these prayers is suggested in the clause 'pro formandis tum conscientiis, tum moribus electorum.' The aim and hoped-for impact of the prayers is the formation of the conscience and character of the faithful.

In Vermigli's prayers themselves there is a striking example of why Vermigli was likely to have agreed with Capito on this point. He repeatedly stresses *in* the prayers that they are prayed daily: *daily* the persons praying call upon God; *daily* they flee to God's mercy; *daily* they seek refuge in God.⁴⁸ This, however, is more than a mere statement of schedule or an exhortation to daily devotion. Vermigli is *performing* a daily prayer, and he positively acknowledges the value of a daily repetition of prayer. This indicates that he thought of his *Preces* as texts whose primary aim was to be prayed, and hence to form the minds and habits of those who pray. We have seen how in the history of their interpretation, this *telos* of the *Preces* has often been ignored. What questions, however, should be addressed to historical prayers in order to overcome this bypassing? It is arguably first of all necessary to clarify what is specific about the genre of prayer.

Prayers are to be prayed: taking the genre seriously

What is the specificity of the genre 'prayer,' and how can it be taken seriously when studying historical prayers? What does it mean for the understanding of a particular source that its historical *telos* was for it to be prayed? In this final section, I propose to address these questions with the help of J. L. Austin's theory of language as well as – mainly –

⁴⁷ *Precationes Christianae ... Quibus egregiae quaedam accesserunt, pro formandis tum conscientiis, tum moribus electorum*; cf. fn. 27 above.

⁴⁸ Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 15; 57; 67.

Jean-Louis Chrétien's phenomenology of prayer.⁴⁹ I will moreover apply the insights gained from Austin and Chrétien to Vermigli's *Preces sacrae*. Why phenomenology? Phenomenology studies phenomena at their most basic level; it describes them as they appear and reveal themselves. As such, phenomenological descriptions are to some degree transhistorical, even though they originated in the specific socio-historical setting of 20th-century France. A phenomenological understanding of prayer can therefore elucidate our understanding of historical prayers such as those of Vermigli.

Let us begin, however, by considering J. L. Austin's classic *How to Do Things with Words*. Austin famously concluded that it is impossible for words to be constative only.⁵⁰ To varying degrees, any uttering of words always carries with it a performative meaning. This is to say that there are cases where it is obvious that pronouncing a sentence is doing an action at the same time (such as in the case of a vow, where uttering the vow creates a new reality). Nonetheless, it is hard ultimately to distinguish between the performative and the constative, which leads Austin later to qualify the distinction. For even the English sentence 'The cat is on the mat,' which has become something like the paradigmatic example of a simple constative sentence, could be seen as the elliptical version of 'I hereby affirm that the cat is on the mat,' a performative utterance that accomplishes the act of affirming that to which it refers.⁵¹ For the study of prayers, this confirms our suspicion that – *pace* Selderhuis – it is not only inadvisable, but simply impossible to focus exclusively on whatever constative 'content' a prayer has, apart from what it performatively does. Or, to put it in Chrétien's words: 'The possible truth of a prayer as speech act cannot be reduced solely to that of the predicative theological propositions that it utters or presupposes.'⁵²

What is it, however, that a prayer *does*, in excess of the theological propositions it expresses? Jean-Louis Chrétien describes prayer as 'an act of presence to the invisible ... by which the man praying stands in the presence of a being in which he believes but does

⁴⁹ Chrétien, "The Wounded Word."

⁵⁰ Austin, *How to Do Things*.

⁵¹ Culler, "Philosophy and Literature," 504.

⁵² Chrétien, "The Wounded Word," 155-6.

not see and manifests himself to it.’⁵³ Interestingly, this account does not describe prayer as an act of communicating information or transmitting knowledge to an invisible interlocutor. This, Chrétien holds, is not the function of prayer at all – thereby pre-empting the classic objection addressed to (monotheist) prayer, namely that a God for whom all is transparently clear has no need of any human being to declare anything to him at all. The word of prayer affects the sender, not the addressee, Chrétien maintains: ‘it is we who are taught by this word, and it is on us that it acts.’⁵⁴ This should not lead us to conclude, however, that Chrétien embraces a psychologically watered-down view of prayer as mere auto-suggestion. Rather, he says, the fact that an ‘other’ is silently introduced into my dialogue with myself radically transforms and breaks this very dialogue.

This insight provides us with a new perspective on why Vermigli might have prayed *at all*. After all, one could be astonished that he, who held a staunch belief in God’s all-knowing providence and predestination,⁵⁵ felt the need to say anything to God at all. He even prayed: ‘So great is your knowledge and providence, O almighty God, that you know completely every single human word, deed, and thought. Even before our souls express their thoughts with the tongue, you know them.’⁵⁶ Why did Vermigli *express* that there is no need to express our thoughts to God, since he already knows them before they were formed? Perhaps Vermigli had grasped something of what Chrétien describes phenomenologically, namely, that prayer is not so much a conveyance of information or petition to God, but much more a manifestation of the self before God. Perhaps he intuited that by speaking to God, and by prayerfully saying something *about* him, we say at the same time something about ourselves. Or, as Chrétien puts it: ‘We are made manifest to ourselves ... in manifesting ourselves to him.’⁵⁷

⁵³ Ibid., 149.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 152-3.

⁵⁵ See on this James, *Vermigli and Predestination*. In the prayers, see for instance the second prayer on Psalm 90: “O almighty God ... you predestined us to attain your eternal gifts before the mountains came to be or the earth was formed,” – Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 87.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 152.

⁵⁷ Chrétien, “The Wounded Word,” 153.

How, we can therefore ask, is Vermigli made manifest to himself in his prayers? In nearly all his prayers, Vermigli does penance for his and his contemporaries' sins. He continuously pronounces his own human finitude and fallenness. He prays in numerous variations on the theme that 'we have not at all lived up to our knowledge of your Word and your teaching,'⁵⁸ indeed that 'we have brought into disgrace your teaching ... by our unjust lives and wicked behaviour.'⁵⁹ It is the human propensity to sin that causes the misery human beings find themselves in: 'We are wretched and cast off, not because of the effort and care with which you fashioned us, but because of our own sins and infinite guilt which we ourselves have accumulated.'⁶⁰ God had created human beings good, bestowed them with many gifts and called them to be holy. Yet, Vermigli prays: 'We have been utterly ungrateful for your precious benefits and have misused your calling, gospel, and sacraments.'⁶¹

Without doubt, such prayers are anchored in a strong theology of the Fall, and a theological anthropology centred on God's salvation. The fact, however, that in his prayers Vermigli acknowledges human depravity personally and existentially gives them a dimension which goes beyond the merely propositional. In prayer, Vermigli is made manifest to himself as someone who falls short of his calling – even he, who was perceived and respected by his contemporaries as exceptionally pious and godly.⁶² He is made manifest to himself as someone who is finite and fallen. In Chrétien's poetical words: 'In the at once discrete and inescapable light of prayer, [the praying subject] is visible from now on, and in this light he discovers that no man is worthy of prayer.'⁶³ Indeed, in the light of prayer, Vermigli is made manifest as someone who is not God, and never will be. In other words, with prayer Vermigli is faced with the 'ordeal of transcendence.'⁶⁴ This is why he repeats the penance over and over again: Every prayer, as

⁵⁸ Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 71.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶² Cf. Simler's oration on the life of Vermigli in Vermigli, *Life, Letters, and Sermons*, 9-62, esp. 62.

⁶³ Chrétien, "The Wounded Word," 157.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 161.

an act of presence to the transcendent, is a transgression of all measure for finite and fallen human beings. It is this agonistic recognition, one can reckon, which is at the heart of Vermigli's repeated acts of penitence. This, moreover, is to say significantly more than merely to distil the author's theology of the Fall out of the prayers.

However, if Vermigli's acknowledgment of his own unworthiness is due to the ordeal of transcendence experienced in prayer, how does this square with the fact that he continuously connects his and his contemporaries' sinfulness to the calamities of his time? For in his prayers Vermigli often mourns the evils which had befallen the Church of his time, and accounts for them by means of his own and his fellow Christians' unworthiness. For example: 'We acknowledge that we have brought all these evils down upon your Church because until now we have lived a life unworthy of your name and of our calling.'⁶⁵ There is a pervading sense in the prayers not only of being in a time of great distress, but also of this distress being self-inflicted. 'We [have] rightly merited the sufferings that we are enduring, '... 'we are undergoing sufferings commensurate with our sins'⁶⁶ – thus or similarly Vermigli repeatedly concludes. Is this not a better explanation for why he stresses human sinfulness, rather than the ordeal of transcendence mentioned above? Put differently, does Vermigli's theology of God's justice and wrath, taken together with his theology of human fallenness, not account for the pervading sense, in the prayers, that the praying person deserves his or her sufferings? I propose that it does not *sufficiently* account for it, because the theme of deserving one's present sufferings is again about more than a merely propositional theology.

To say that human sins rightly deserve God's punishment is, on the most basic level, to acknowledge that the crisis one goes through can be accounted for. Saying that there is a reason for one's present calamities, and moreover seeing this reason as within one's own sphere of influence, is challenging and empowering in equal measure. It implies, first, that the person praying could change her present fate herself. Yet beyond this, when uttering the same as part of an act of presence to God, any act-and-consequence-connection that the speaker might have perceived is broken. The presence of the Divine 'other' puts into perspective her own ability to change her situation; it reveals

⁶⁵ Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 101.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 21, 46.

her own capacity as ultimately rather limited. Saying in the presence of the Divine that one has deserved one's present distress is a declaration of trust. It is to trust that nothing happens without God bestowing it, and, more emphatically still, it is to trust that God is God no matter what. In and beyond their penitent and mournful tones, Vermigli's prayers are crucially about trusting in God's goodness. 'May our sins not conquer your goodness,'⁶⁷ he prays, or again: 'do not allow our sins to restrain your goodness.'⁶⁸ To ask thus is not only to confess God's goodness, but also to dispossess the person praying of their egocentrism. For to ask is 'actually to acknowledge not being the origin of every good and every gift,' as Chrétien puts it⁶⁹ – and, we might add, to ask thus is also to acknowledge that God's gifts will not be taken away, regardless of how much the praying recipient, in her finitude, continuously fails to live up to the gifts bestowed.

'All prayer confesses God as giver,' Chrétien continues.⁷⁰ This indeed is true for Vermigli's prayers, both implicitly – as we have seen – as well as explicitly. There is a repeated strong focus in Vermigli's prayers on God as the giver and source of everything. 'O good and great God,' Vermigli prays, 'you are the fount and source of every good thing [fons et radix es omnis boni], and both our salvation and everything pleasant in life flows from you.'⁷¹ Or again: 'It is you alone, O almighty God, whom we acknowledge and confess as the source of all we have [a quo nos omnia nostra habere].'⁷² Praise like this often spills over, as it were, in confessions about who God is: 'You are not only the highest good but also goodness itself [non tantum esse summum bonum, verum ipsam bonitatem],'⁷³ Vermigli prays in numerous variations.⁷⁴ There is nothing in the world, he also prays, which does not bear witness to God's goodness.⁷⁵ All of this, again, is not

⁶⁷ Ibid., Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 47.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 56.

⁶⁹ Chrétien, "The Wounded Word," 153.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 153.

⁷¹ Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 65 [translation modified].

⁷² Ibid., 108.

⁷³ Ibid., 13.

⁷⁴ See *ibid.*, 75, 130.

⁷⁵ "There is nothing in the world that does not bear witness [*attestetur*] that you are good." Ibid., 32.

sufficiently accounted for by subscribing, in a propositional way, to the doctrine of God's creation out of nothing. It means also to acknowledge him, whom the prayer addresses, for what he is. Standing in his presence overflows into this acknowledgment.

The first three sections of this article insisted on the uniqueness and prayerful character of Peter Martyr Vermigli's *Preces sacrae*. This fourth section exemplifies how this prayer-character can be taken seriously in studying the source. Deploying Jean-Louis Chrétien's phenomenological approach, we have so far clarified what the specificity of the genre of prayer is, and have also showed how Vermigli's prayers offer good representations of Christian prayer in general.

Beyond this, is there anything which is specific about Vermigli's particular prayers? Is there any indication, for instance, that his prayers are particularly Reformed? If one takes the quasi-caricature according to which Protestants have a much stronger sense of the fallenness of creation, whereas Catholics are more 'optimistic' in their view of both human beings and nature, then it is specific to Vermigli's praying that it is not simply 'Protestant.' To be sure, and as seen above, he prays out of a strong sense of the radical and recurring sinfulness of human beings – even the fact that he draws his words from Scripture is partly an expression of this. His prayers are pervaded by an Augustinian sense of the fallenness of human beings. That Vermigli manifests himself as sinful, however, is not only counterbalanced in the same breath by manifestations of trust in God's goodness and mercy ('Our sins have us in their grip ... still we approach you relying on the abundance of your great goodness'⁷⁶; or, 'even if we are buried in sins and iniquities, we still rely on your mercy and pray that you take away sins.'⁷⁷) It is also qualified by the prayer that God, in his mercy, may make human beings true sharers in divine goodness. 'Make those whom you wanted to be a little less than the angels to be sharers in your own divine nature [tuae ipsius naturae consortes facias],' Vermigli prays.⁷⁸ And again: 'make the church ... share in your wondrous goodness [communices ... ecclesiae tuam admirabilem bonitatem].'⁷⁹ Petitions like these indicate that for Vermigli, justification

⁷⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 60.

involves a transformative event in which God really bestows his gracious gifts, and not merely externally so. This means that human beings and all of creation, through God's grace, can witness to God. Precisely this witnessing of creation to God's goodness, however, is almost equally as present in Vermigli's prayers as is his sense of the human Fall. 'There is nothing in the world that does not bear witness that you are good (Nihil est in orbe quod te bonum esse non attestetur),' Vermigli declares.⁸⁰ And again: 'your supreme goodness has arranged that a knowledge of you can be engendered in our hearts by the beautiful appearance, arrangement, and adornment of your creatures.'⁸¹ Whereas all creatures speak of God's goodness, the Church does so in particular: 'all creatures bear shining witness to your goodness [omnes creaturae ... tuam luculenter bonitatem contestantur],' Vermigli prays, 'but the Church is the special work in which you are uniquely praised and glorified.'⁸²

The *Preces* manifest, therefore, simultaneously a sense of the radical and inevitable sinfulness of human beings and an appreciation that human nature, together with all of creation, nonetheless speaks of God's goodness. Indeed, the fact that Vermigli prays for God to make human beings communicants in his own goodness means that he contemplated the possibility of a human participation in the Divine. This possibility, and the simultaneity of both human sinfulness and the possibility of their participation in God's goodness in Vermigli's prayers, defies any all-too-simple aligning of Vermigli with later developments in Reformed orthodoxy where 'total depravity' came to be seen as a hallmark of true doctrine.

Another specificity of Vermigli's prayers that again defies the caricature of the Reformation as the cradle of individualism or of the 'creative subject' is the way Vermigli implicitly and performatively de-emphasises his own persona as the author of the prayers. We have seen above that one of the likely reasons why Vermigli chose to compose his prayers in the particular way he did, was that he wished to follow in the footsteps of Capito. This, combined with the view that the Psalms were at that time seen as the only truly fitting words with which fallen human beings can call on God's name, leads to a

⁸⁰ Ibid., 32.

⁸¹ Ibid., 21.

⁸² Ibid., 48.

deeper appreciation of the importance Vermigli gave to his own originality. In his prayers, Vermigli performed a double move away from himself. He not only joined his voice to the trans-temporal choir of Psalm-praying believers, but also, in his particular way of praying the Psalms, followed his predecessor and brother in Christ, Capito. His prayers were thus doubly mediated through the communion of saints. Or, to put this differently, they were self-consciously ‘twice removed’ from originality. This implies that for Vermigli, the aim and significance of his prayers did not only lie in their content and in what he, as an author, had put into them. He precisely intended to point away from himself, rather than the prayers being primarily about the way he, as a privileged interpreter, understood the Psalms, or read the signs of his time.

That Vermigli’s prayers were mediated through the communion of saints can moreover be seen in the consistent use of the first person plural in them. A collective prayer, it is to be remembered, is no ‘imaginary entity floating above the individuals who pronounce it.’ Rather, it ‘is rooted in the act proper to each [person praying].’⁸³ Vermigli, being true to this general characteristic of prayer, was not imposing his prayers on everyone present. On the contrary, he grounded his prayers in the body of Christ. Vermigli expressed the relation between Christ and the members of his body when he prayed that it is ‘impossible’ for Christ’s happiness ‘not to be communicated also to us, his members, and greatly overflow from his salvation, good deeds and glory [non poterit in nos quoque membra non diffundi et redundare multum de salute, donis et gloria ipsius].’⁸⁴ This overflowing moreover speaks of how Vermigli’s prayers are no beginning, but a response. All prayer is, as Chrétien writes, ‘surpassed and preceded by the one to whom it is addressed’⁸⁵ and ‘the man praying speaks for a hearing that has always already come before his speech.’⁸⁶

Conclusion

Vermigli’s *Preces* were prayed at the beginning of his lectures. As such, they are a striking illustration for how worship and learning were mutually intertwined in Protestant

⁸³ Chrétien, “The Wounded Word,” 171.

⁸⁴ Vermigli, *Sacred Prayers*, 22.

⁸⁵ Chrétien, “The Wounded Word,” 158.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 161.

academies of his time. Chrétien's phenomenological account of the prayer-genre leads to a fuller appreciation, both of how this integration worked and of the *Preces* as a source more broadly. Chrétien highlights that it is impossible to consider the predicative theological propositions of the prayers in abstraction from their form, because prayer is not primarily a conveyance of information, but a manifestation of the self before the Divine. Vermigli, by speaking to God, declared himself and his students as trusting in God's goodness, despite falling short of their calling.

This phenomenologically-informed approach to the prayer-genre leads to two insights regarding the integration of worship and learning in Vermigli's work. First, it indicates how Vermigli, in his academic teaching, understood himself as part of the invisible communion of saints. This can be seen in the way he joined his prayers to the multitude of those who prayed the Psalms through the ages, and also in the way he followed the practice of his predecessor and brother in Christ, Capito. Secondly, if it is granted that the *Preces* opened up the space for the lectures which were to follow and thereby determined their tone, this indicates that Vermigli's teaching can be seen in its entirety as an act of response.

Note on the contributor

Silvianne Aspray (née Bürki) is completing her doctoral research at the Cambridge University Faculty of Divinity on sixteenth-century metaphysics with reference to the ontology of Peter Martyr Vermigli.

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